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Possible Soviet Missile Sites in Cuba

The latest intelligence information gathered by U.S. surveillance satellites and other sources has confronted the Carter administration with the alarming possibility that the Soviet Union is once more preparing nuclear missile sites in Cuba.

The introduction of nuclear missiles into the Russian-dominated island 90 miles from Florida took the world to the brink of war in 1962. That time, the Kremlin backed down in the face of a determined stand by President Kennedy.

But the Soviet leaders have obviously decided that Jimmy Carter is a president who can be pushed around. His sorry performance last October—when he marched up the hill and back down again over the presence of a Soviet combat brigade in Cuba—coupled with his ineffectual handling of the Tehran hostage situation, may have convinced the Russians they can flout the Monroe Doctrine with impunity.

This changed attitude of the normally cautious old men in the Kremlin lends urgency to U.S. intelligence analysts' attempt to figure out the intended use of several large holes the Russians are digging near the Cuban city of Matanzas. Are they an innocent feature of a suburban housing development, or underground silos for nuclear missiles aimed at the United States?

CIA sources have told my associate Dale Van Atta that the holes are "strikingly similar" in size, shape and construction to those that house nuclear missiles in the Soviet Union. Other agency analysts are not so sure, theorizing that the holes could be part of housing construction or similarly peaceful projects.

The experts who lean toward the view that the holes are missile sites are the same ones who argued—correctly—that the Soviet brigade identified last year was a combat unit.

In support of their interpretation, these analysts point out that the construction near Matanzas, and particularly the Russians' involvement in it, are being protected by unusually strict security. The secrecy extends to the point of barricading the road that leads east from Havana to the construction area.

The mystery of the Matanzas holes is just one more ominous development in the Soviets' increasingly bold military presence in Cuba. In recent months I've reported a number of disturbing intelligence discoveries from Cuba:

- There are already two airfields on the island that can accommodate the Russians' Backfire bomber, and runways at a third field are being lengthened to the required 9,000 feet. A Defense Intelligence Agency report last year warned that the Soviets may send a detachment of the nuclear bombers to Cuba in 1980.

- Our spy satellites over Cuba have sent back pictures of a suspicious-looking building at Punta Movida, near Cienfuegos. It closely resembles the Soviets' nuclear missile storage and maintenance sheds in Eastern Europe. Some intelligence analysts caution, however, that the Cienfuegos construction, which includes a railroad line to the naval base at Punta Movida, may be simply part of a nuclear power plant the Russians are building there.

- The Soviets have been upgrading their communications equipment in Cuba, and can now conduct virtually simultaneous two-way exchanges be-

tween Havana and the Soviets' intelligence headquarters in Moscow. Havana has become the KGB's relay center for its intelligence and subversion operations in Latin America.

- Russian pilots have been flying regular reconnaissance missions from secret Cuban bases, monitoring U.S. naval movements in the Atlantic. The Russians even have an independent fighter unit flying MiG21 jets out of an airfield near Havana.